

# *The Sabbath versus the New Moon: A Critique of Heschel's Valorization of the Sabbath*

RON H. FELDMAN

IN THIS PAPER MY AIM IS TO EXAMINE THE VIEWS expressed in Abraham Joshua Heschel's essay *The Sabbath* about Jewish beliefs concerning time and the environment, and present a critique based on the contrasting rhythms of Jewish time as expressed by the Sabbath and the lunisolar year. Heschel's essay has been widely influential, and I personally found it beautiful, inspiring, and influential in my own Jewish education. However, my studies of environmental thought and ancient Jewish calendars have led me to a critique of Heschel's essay which focuses on what I see as an internal contradiction. This critique is not limited to Heschel, but I choose Heschel as the focus because he epitomizes—and helped to create—certain perspectives about the Sabbath commonly held by American Jews. By identifying this internal contradiction I hope to push Jewish environmental thought in a direction that, I contend, can in fact be seen as furthering some of Heschel's own views.

Heschel's theology of the Sabbath has two main thrusts. The first concerns its place in Judaism while the second concerns "its meaning for modern man," as the essay's subtitle states.

Heschel contends that Judaism is "more concerned with time than space"<sup>1</sup> and that it is "a religion of time aiming at the sanctification of time."<sup>2</sup> This view fits in neatly with the common view, also shared by Heschel, that after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. and the elimination of its sacrificial cult, the decline of the Jewish community in the Land of Israel and the growth of the Diaspora led Judaism to evolve into a religious culture concerned more with time than space, as exemplified in the shifting emphasis of the annual holiday observances away from their agricultural roots toward commemorations of events in the mythic history of the Jewish people.<sup>3</sup> Samson Raphael Hirsch famously summed up the importance of time to Judaism with his comment that, "The Jew's catechism is his calendar."<sup>4</sup> Along these lines, Heschel contends that, "While the deities of other peoples were associated with places or things, the God of Israel was the God of events."<sup>5</sup>

## JUDAISM

A JOURNAL OF JEWISH LIFE & THOUGHT

ISSUE No. 213/214 / VOLUME 54 / NUMBERS 1-2 / WINTER-SPRING 2005

RON H. FELDMAN edited *The Jew as Pariah, a collection of essays by Hannah Arendt on Jewish identity and politics. He recently received his Ph.D. in Jewish History and Culture from The Graduate Theological Union with a dissertation on ancient Jewish calendars. His review of Calendar and Community: A History of the Jewish Calendar, Second Century BCE - Tenth Century CE, by Sacha Stern, appeared in the Winter/Spring 2003 issue.*

And there is no more significant event than the creation of the world, of which the Sabbath is the memorial.

Yet for Heschel it is not merely time vs. space that is important; there are different types of time within Judaism, each with its own quality:

While the festivals celebrate events that happened in time, the date of the month assigned for each festival in the calendar is determined by the life in nature...In contrast, the Sabbath is entirely independent of the month and unrelated to the moon. Its date is not determined by any event in nature, such as the new moon, but by the act of creation. Thus the essence of the Sabbath is completely detached from the world of space.

The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space. Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to *holiness in time*.<sup>6</sup>

The Sabbath rest rules are not merely for the purpose of recovering physical strength but for enlivening both body and soul. Unlike the destroyed sanctuary in Jerusalem, “The Sabbath itself is a sanctuary which we build, a *sanctuary in time*.”<sup>7</sup> Hence, it is the epitome, the archetype of the Jewish concept of time. “The Sabbath is the most precious present mankind has received from the treasure house of God.”<sup>8</sup>

But Heschel asserts a theological and ethical significance to the Sabbath that goes beyond Judaism, for the Sabbath is “the day on which we learn the art of *surpassing civilization*”<sup>9</sup> The prohibitions against work on the Sabbath are central to its qualitative difference:

On the Sabbath we live, as it were, *independent of technical civilization*: we abstain primarily from any activity that aims at remaking or reshaping the things of space. Man’s royal privilege to conquer nature is suspended on the seventh day...The seventh day is the armistice in man’s cruel struggle for existence, a truce in all conflicts, personal and social, peace between man and man, man and nature, peace within man.<sup>10</sup>

The idea of Sabbath as a time of peace between humans and nature has had a significant impact on environmental thinkers, especially those who are Jewish. The command for Sabbath rest (along with its related periodicities, the seventh year sabbatical and the fiftieth year jubilee) has been taken as a model for ways to repair the relationship of humans with the environment. The links to the seven-day biblical cosmogony of Genesis 1–2 gives these proposals a religious and cultural resonance in western culture.

Arthur Waskow points to Heschel as one of his predecessors, pointing out that “Heschel suggested that the practice of Shabbat in some form might be profoundly important to the entire human race—not to the Jewish people alone—in redeeming the world from the threat of technology run amok.”<sup>10</sup> Waskow proposes that perhaps every seventh day could be observed worldwide “with minimum use of fossil fuels like gasoline and coal, so that

the earth’s atmosphere could rest from being drenched in carbon dioxide.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly, he proposes a “*techno-shmitah*” in which “every seventh year engineers and scientists would suspend work (except for work on mortal diseases)” and business would refrain from introducing new products and services.<sup>13</sup>

Utilizing the distinction between tame and wild developed in environmental thought, Evan Eisenberg also draws on this theme when he connects the quality of wildness with the Sabbath:

On the Sabbath, both humans and animals are freed from the grind of domestication; all technology, right down to the kindling of fire, is taboo. In the sabbatical year, the land itself is allowed to revert to a state of wildness. Sabbath, sabbatical, and jubilee are all eruptions of wildness into the humdrum of the technical and economic order.<sup>14</sup>

Eisenberg then suggests extending what he sees as the “wildness” of the Sabbath into the realm of space:

If the Sabbath is a wilderness in time, then wilderness is a Sabbath in space. Why not use the interlocked cycles of Sabbath, sabbatical, and jubilee as a model for the way wildness ought to be distributed in space? Take any geographic unit—country, state, province, county, town, borough, precinct, block, backyard. Let each unit devote one-seventh of its land to wilderness, or something as close to wilderness as circumstances permit. If the wilderness is there already, let it be preserved; if not, let it be created.<sup>15</sup>

From an environmentalist perspective I think these proposals extending the concept of the Sabbath as a time for humans to restrain ourselves from the exploitation of nature are laudable and worth considering. Nevertheless, the reliance on the Sabbath as a model of “peace with nature” strikes me as problematic because, as noted by many others as well as Heschel, the temporal rhythm of the Sabbath is inherently “unnatural.” Indeed, Heschel lauds this as the ground from which the observer can “become attuned to *holiness in time*.”<sup>16</sup>

Thus, we find ourselves with two contradictory claims concerning the character of the Sabbath. On the one hand is the claim that the Sabbath is a time of peace and harmony between humans and nature. On the other hand, “The physical world became divested of any inherent sanctity,”<sup>17</sup> because the Sabbath’s strictly calculated rhythm liberated sacred time from the natural cycle of the lunation. Therefore the endless seven-day rhythm of the Sabbath, ostensibly established by divine decree but only marked in the world by human counting, hardly seems like a moment of peace between “man and nature” or “complete harmony between man and nature.” While it may be a time of “peace” due to practices that restrain human activity, the rhythm is not natural and has nothing to do with the needs of nature.

I suggest that this contradiction has its source in the conflation between the *periodicity* of the Sabbath and the *rest laws* of the Sabbath i.e., between the Sabbath's temporal structure vs. its ritual content. The rest practices largely involve a withdrawal from this world as a way of moving into closer communion with God facilitated through prayer, study and community, disengagement with the world in order to engage with the divine. While I agree that Sabbath rest limits human exploitation of nature, these rules are not unique to the Sabbath, as exemplified by the fact that they are also in place for a number of annual holidays, such as Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Pesach, Sukkot, and Shavuot (even if Sabbath rest is used as the model for these by Rabbinical Judaism).

Therefore, the posited “peace” between humans and nature experienced on the Sabbath is totally dependent on the Sabbath restrictions against work, not on its seventh-day periodicity *per se*. The seven-day rhythm of the Sabbath is artificial, itself a work of civilization, a disturbance in the natural flow of time as marked by the earth, moon, and sun. While attributed to God, the Sabbath only exists in this world if humans “remember-*zakhor*” (Exodus 20:8) to “preserve-*shamor*” (Deuteronomy 5:12) it, as the two versions of the Decalogue respectively declare. Indeed, Heschel prefers the Sabbath precisely *because* its cycle is independent of nature; the artificial periodicity of the Sabbath enhances and facilitates the spiritual experience of withdrawing from the natural world into an abstract realm of time by divesting the physical world of “any inherent sanctity.”<sup>18</sup>

But Heschel's celebration of the de-sanctification of nature inherent in the Sabbath can be turned on its head: the Sabbath's temporal distancing of humans from nature was a critical step in Western cultural history toward separating humans from nature, with the later consequence of utilizing strictly calculated time and schedules as a tool for the human subjugation of nature. Like the later invention of the mechanical clock, the artificial rhythm of the Sabbath was not an unqualified boon but a mixed blessing.

So, if the *rhythm* of the Sabbath is inherently opposed to the thesis that the Sabbath is a time of peace between humans and nature, where does this leave Jewish environmentalism? I suggest we turn to that other fundamental rhythm of Jewish time, the lunation. Indeed, the Jewish calendar in use today preserves both temporal cycles and the unruly lack of fit between them in its “*architecture of time*,”<sup>19</sup> a tension between the *wild* rhythms of nature embodied in the festivals linked to the cycles of lunation and year versus the *tame* rhythm of culture manifested by the weekly Sabbath.

In the temporal realm the seventh-day Sabbath is *tame*; it is the product of civilization—calculable, predictable, orderly. Its institutionalization was closely linked to the priestly courses in the Jerusalem Temple, the *mishmarot*, as exemplified in Qumran calendar texts that are best understood as ancient work schedules created for use by the priestly bureaucracy. In short, the Sabbath is artificial; it only exists if people mark it. Wild nature knows

nothing of the seventh-day Sabbath; non-human “rest” does not occur on a seven-day rhythm.

In contrast, the appearance of the first crescent of the new moon is an especially *wild* time. Even today modern astronomy is unable to predict the visibility of any particular first crescent, not merely owing to meteorological or geographical variability, but due to the uncertainty of the multiple complex systems involved.<sup>20</sup> While the contemporary Jewish calendar is mathematically calculated, it is meant to emulate the cycles of sun, moon, and stars, for it evolved from the earlier observational system described in the Mishnah. It is these cycles that determine the parameters of life on earth. However, the “average” lunation is based not on observation but on the unseen, theoretical conjunction of sun, moon, and earth; it is easily calculable (by tracking lunar eclipses), which is part of why it eventually supplanted the observance of the new crescent in the Jewish calendar.

If Judaism is a “religion of time,” as Heschel claims, it is a religion of *both* tame and wild time, for it sanctifies not only the act of creation—recounted every Sabbath—but the living creation itself, the days, months and years marked by the heavenly luminaries, which according to Genesis were created for this purpose on the fourth day of the primordial week. While Heschel is aware that Jewish time includes not only the Sabbath but also the festivals linked to “life in nature,” he clearly valorizes the former at the expense of the latter. I contend that if, as Hirsh asserted, “The Jew's catechism is his calendar,”<sup>21</sup> we must consider the *whole* calendar used by Rabbinic Judaism, not just the Sabbath.

The contemporary Jewish calendar maintains an uneasy symbiosis between two cycles of time, which run independently of each other: the Sabbath and the lunation, as Heschel admitted. In my view, the Jewish calendar preserves the possibility of connecting to the wild rhythms of nature via the observance of the new moons and the annual holidays that are determined by the lunations and the agricultural seasons of the earth: this is also a means of “*surpassing* civilization,”<sup>22</sup> not by escaping from the world into the tame time of the Sabbath, but by embracing the wild rhythms of nature repressed by our clock driven culture. These too have been traditionally seen as divinely created moments of closeness to God, *through* the natural rhythms determined by the “lights in the dome of the heavens,” that God created “to separate the day from the night, that they may be for signs—for set-times, for days and years (Genesis 1:14).”<sup>23</sup>

While in the ancient world it was the Sabbath that seemed odd about Jewish time, in the contemporary world it is the Jewish lunisolar calendar that seems odd and out of place. Ironically, it is the dominance of the Gregorian calendar that has made the Jewish Sabbath seem *tamer*, and the annual holidays *wilder*, despite the fact that the lunar months of the Jewish calendar have been calculated at least since the ninth century C.E. at the latest, if not earlier. Courtesy of the worldwide reach of the Gregorian calendar that

accompanied European expansion over the last 500 years, the seventh-day Jewish Sabbath conveniently fits into “weekends,” a phenomenon of the seven-day week that itself was a rhythm of time that resulted from the biblical seventh-day Sabbath.

In contrast, the Jewish holidays—dependent on the lunation—are commonly experienced as coming “early” or “late,” conveniently on the weekend or inconveniently in mid-week; every year is different from the last. In the context of the Gregorian calendar, the Jewish holidays are experienced as irregular, disorderly, inconvenient and a nuisance disrupting our schedules. In this sense, despite the fact that the contemporary Jewish calendar is calculated, thanks to its basis in the lunation, the annual holidays are nevertheless experienced as unruly and wild. Of course, the holidays of the Jewish calendar are never “early” or “late”—they simply fall when they fall, matching the rhythm of the moon. Indeed, given the hegemony of the Gregorian calendar, the effort needed to live in concert with the rhythms of the new moons and annual holidays is a more radical socio-political activity than observing Sabbath on the weekend.

I have contended that, while Heschel argues that on the Sabbath we live “*independent of technical civilization*,” this is impossible because the calculated periodicity of the Sabbath is itself a marking of time that depends on human civilization; even when construed as a divine commandment, it is left to humans to implement. In addition, while Heschel maintains that the Sabbath is a time of peace—or, at least, armistice—between humans and nature, I contend that the unnatural rhythm of the Sabbath constitutes a distancing of humans from nature that constitutes a temporal display of humanity’s “mastery”<sup>24</sup> of the earth.

Yet Heschel’s claim that the Sabbath’s rest rules lead to an “armistice” between humans and nature has rightly been influential among Jewish environmentalists, for it has pointed out that Judaism has traditions which encourage conviviality with nature. My argument is that we should no longer valorize *separation from nature* but *engagement with nature*. To the extent that the calendar is the “catechism” of Jewish life, then the issue of the proper way for humans to live in the natural environment is a concern embedded in the core of Judaism. I suggest that the Jewish calendar’s rhythms of new moon and seasonal holy days provide a path towards Heschel’s vision of an armistice between humans and nature by constructing connections between sacred human times and the wild rhythms of nature, thereby encouraging awareness of—and engagement with—the “more than human world.”<sup>25</sup>

## NOTES

1. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), p. 6.

2. Heschel, p. 8.

3. See, for example, Eviatar Zerubavel, *Hidden Rhythms: Schedules and Calendars in Social Life*

(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 105–108.

4. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Naphtali Hirsch, vol. 1 (Frankfurt am Main: J. Kauffmann, 1908), p. 3.

5. Heschel, pp. 7–8.

6. Heschel, p. 10.

7. Heschel, p. 29.

8. Heschel, p. 18.

9. Heschel, p. 27.

10. Heschel, pp. 28–29.

11. Arthur Waskow, *Down-to-Earth Judaism* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1995), pp. 371–372.

12. Waskow, p. 372.

13. Waskow, p. 372.

14. Evan Eisenberg, *The Ecology of Eden* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), p. 130.

15. Eisenberg, p. 408.

16. Heschel, p. 10.

17. Heschel, p. 79.

18. Heschel, p. 79.

19. Heschel, p. 8.

20. Sacha Stern, *Calendar and Community: A History of the Jewish Calendar, Second Century BCE - Tenth Century c.e.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 110–111; Kim Long, *The Moon Book* (Boulder, CO: Johnson Books, 1998), pp. 43–47.

21. Hirsch, p. 3.

22. Heschel, p. 27.

23. Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy: A New Translation with Introductions, Commentary, and Notes* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), p. 14.

24. There is a great deal of literature devoted to the interpretation and significance of Genesis 1: 28. See, for example, Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Science* 153, no. 3767 (1967); Jeremy Cohen, “*Be Fertile and Increase, Fill the Earth and Master It*”: *The Ancient and Medieval Career of a Biblical Text* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989); Theodore Hiebert, *The Yahwist’s Landscape: Nature and Religion in Early Israel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

25. A phrase borrowed from David Abram. See David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).

## *Communications*

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DEAR EDITOR:

Ron H. Feldman's essay on the Sabbath vs. the new moon (Winter/Spring 2005) was fascinating in the extreme. There is one point, however, with which I must take issue. That point is the "unnatural problem" connected to Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's thesis.

There is nothing *unnatural* about Heschel's view of the Sabbath in his emphasis on the Jewish calendar as a landscape in time. If indeed there is anything arbitrary about time, it certainly does not occur except in the human invention of minutes, seconds and hours. Only in days, months and years do we see in nature, in fact, a perfect rhythm visible in the cosmos and built into nature as we experience it.

To prove my point, please consider the following as *natural* (i.e., built into nature):

1. Day: the period of the earth's revolution on its own axis.
2. Month: the period of a complete revolution of the moon; or the twelfth part of the solar year.
3. Year: the time of one apparent revolution of the sun around the ecliptic; or the period occupied by the earth in making its revolution around the sun.

The cohesive that connects the three units of natural time is the number seven. The seventh day is the Shabbat. The seventh month is the most sacred month in the Jewish calendar (Tishrei), with the Sabbath of Sabbaths occurring at its

heart and known as Yom Kippur. The seventh year is the year of *Sh'mitah* when the earth "rests," debts are remitted and slaves manumitted.

RABBI ISRAEL C. STEIN  
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RON H. FELDMAN REPLIES:

Rabbi Stein's thoughtful and concise comments precisely illustrate the kind of conflation I am trying to distinguish.

He first asserts that "[t]here is nothing unnatural about Heschel's view of the Sabbath..." While I agree that minutes, seconds and hours are artificial subdivisions of natural time units, the Sabbath is not a marking or measure of any natural time unit. The Sabbath is *defined* by the measure of seven days—as far as nature is concerned, the Sabbath could be defined as six, eight or any other number of days. Actually, Heschel points out that while the dates of the annual festivals are "determined by the life in nature..., [i]n contrast, the Sabbath is entirely independent of the month and unrelated to the moon." As I read it, Heschel is applauding the Sabbath's *unnaturalness*, in contrast to the months.

I agree with the enumeration of the three *natural* cycles of time; this is the raw material with which calendar makers must work. The fact that the Sabbath is not among them is key, for the Sabbath is *unnatural* and is manifested in the world only when we "remember" to "preserve" it. His enumeration of the links between these different natural cycles via the patterns of seven actually makes my point: The sabbatarian pattern is uniquely

Jewish, is integral to the Jewish cultural construction of time—but it is not natural. Left to itself, earthbound nature experiences days, lunar months and solar years—but not the Sabbath, the seventh month, or the seventh year. The combination of the Sabbath with the annual holidays linked to “life in nature” is what defines the complexity and richness of Jewish time—but these patterns of seven are unnatural. Rather, they are a specifically Jewish overlay upon the natural temporal cycles that all creatures get to live with on planet Earth.

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### *Errata*

In the Summer/Fall 2005 issue, we neglected to identify Howard Stecker, author of "Responding to the Temperament of Twenty-First Century Jews." He is senior rabbi of Temple Israel of Great Neck, N.Y.